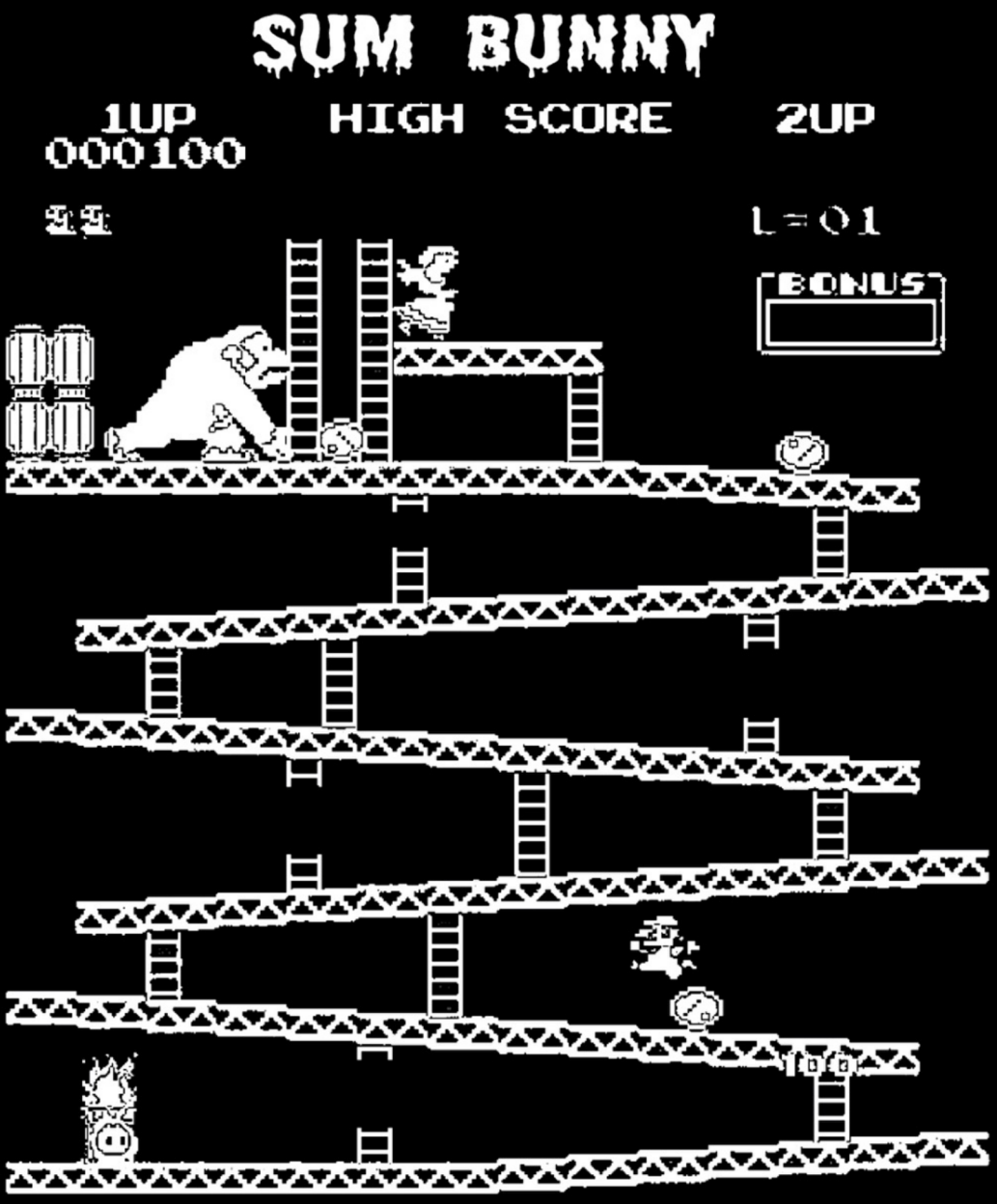

THE DONKEY KONG ECONOMY

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Why Freedom Requires the Power to Stop Playing

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Between boards in the familiar U.S. arcade version of Nintendo's *Donkey Kong*, a question appears: **HOW HIGH CAN YOU GET?**

It sounds like a challenge, but it is also a worldview.

How high can you climb? How many obstacles can you clear? How many points can you accumulate before the machinery catches you? The game does not ask whether the girders should be straight, whether the ladders should reach, who owns the cabinet, or why the gorilla gets to throw barrels from above. It asks what any good arcade machine asks: Can you perform under the conditions you have been given?

Modern economies ask much the same question. How far can you rise? How much can you earn? How quickly can you recover after a layoff, an illness, a rent increase, a bad boss, a divorce, or a recession? We celebrate those who climb brilliantly. We study their habits. We tell children to emulate them. Sometimes the climbers deserve the praise. Skill is real. Discipline matters. Courage matters. Work can be useful, beautiful, and deeply meaningful.

But a scoreboard can answer only the questions it was designed to count.

The original *Donkey Kong* counts points for leaping hazards, smashing obstacles, collecting objects, removing rivets, and finishing quickly. It does not count fear, exhaustion, unpaid care, the humiliation of accepting an abusive offer, or the life postponed while a player keeps climbing. It cannot tell us whether the game is fair. Most importantly, it cannot tell the difference between choosing to play and having no acceptable place to stand outside the cabinet.

That difference is the heart of the case for universal basic income.

A universal basic income, or UBI, is a regular cash payment delivered individually and without a work requirement or means test. Its deepest purpose is not to turn everyone into a winner. It is not a magic hammer, a free score, or an extra life. It is what I will call an **exit floor**: enough material security to make refusal survivable. It gives a worker some power to reject a dangerous job, a caregiver some power to protect time that markets do not reward, a partner some power to leave an abusive home, and everyone some power to negotiate without an empty stomach making the final decision.

The case is not that nobody should play. It is that a society cannot call the game voluntary when the alternative is destitution.

The analogy is useful only if we keep it on a leash. *Donkey Kong* is a fixed program with a small set of possible moves and outcomes. An economy is not. Property rights, labor rules, taxes, and public benefits change through legislation, courts, bargaining, administration, conflict, and democratic action. The game can sharpen a question about freedom. It cannot prove a tax rate, predict inflation, or replace the hard work of designing laws.

1. The Player Is Not Jumpman

Before he was Mario, he was Jumpman: a tiny carpenter in red overalls trying to rescue Pauline from an ape at the top of a construction site. Nintendo released the arcade game in 1981. Its story was rudimentary, but unusually legible for its time. A villain. A captive. A rescuer. A climb. Four unique board types. Three lives by default. One joystick. A jump button. A score.[1]

The simplicity is what makes it such a useful metaphor—and such a dangerous one if we become careless.

The first mistake would be to say that Jumpman simply “is” the worker, Donkey Kong “is” the capitalist, Pauline “is” prosperity, and the barrels “are” bills. That kind of allegory feels satisfying because every object gets a label. It is also too neat to be true. People are not pixels. Employers are not one species. Workers do not all face the same risks. Economic rules grow out of laws, habits, bargaining, technology, conflict, and accident. They were not programmed by one secret operator.

The more useful distinction is not between the game’s hero and villain. It is between **Jumpman and the player**.

Jumpman has no life outside the game. He cannot decline the mission, negotiate the rules, pull the plug, demand safer girders, or spend the afternoon with Pauline. He can move only inside the possibilities the software recognizes. The player, however, stands outside the screen. The player can judge the whole arrangement, walk away, choose another game, or decide that climbing is not worth another quarter.

Human beings are supposed to be players, not characters owned by the cabinet. An economy is a tool for human life. Human life is not raw material for the economy.

Yet material insecurity can collapse that distinction. If refusing the available terms means eviction, untreated illness, hunger, or danger to one’s children, a formal right to walk away may coexist with very little practical power to do so. The body remains outside the machine, but necessity has taken hold of the joystick.

This does not make every employment contract slavery. It does not erase the difference between a tolerable compromise and brutal exploitation. It makes a narrower point: consent is not all-or-nothing. “Yes” means something different when “no” is safe.

2. Who Owns the Cabinet?

Donkey Kong is the most visible source of trouble. He occupies the high ground. He controls the pace of the first board by sending barrels down toward the climber. It is tempting to make him the entire theory of power.

But Donkey Kong does not own the cabinet.

He does not decide that a fall costs a life, that three lives are the default, that the bonus counter declines, that the boards will repeat, or that the player must insert another quarter after failure. He has power because of where he stands, but the deepest rules were written elsewhere. Even the boss is running code.

That matters because political arguments become too simple when every injustice requires a cartoon villain. Some harms are intentional: wage theft, fraud, intimidation, discrimination, union busting, and deliberate exposure to danger. Others arise without a mastermind: a housing shortage created by thousands of local vetoes; an insurance system whose incentives produce absurdity; an industry where every firm feels compelled to adopt practices none of its employees enjoy; a labor market where many separate “choices” combine into a race nobody consciously chose.

There are Donkey Kongs in an economy—people and institutions with the power to send risk downhill while keeping rewards uphill. But blaming a few bad apes cannot substitute for examining the cabinet. Property law, labor law, healthcare, housing, credit, taxation, public services, unions, and other ways people bargain together help determine who can wait, who must accept, who absorbs a shock, and who gets to call an offer voluntary.

Power is often most durable when it looks like scenery.

The crooked girders are simply there. The broken ladders are simply there. The timer is simply there. A player who complains can be told that everyone faces the same screen. On paper, that may be true. In life, players arrive with different reserves, different responsibilities, different bodies, different exposure to discrimination, and different numbers of quarters.

Before asking who threw a particular barrel, we should ask who bears the cost when it lands—and why the person below had so little room to refuse the climb.

3. The Economy Is a Construction Site

The game’s setting is not a finished kingdom. It is a construction site: exposed beams, open gaps, moving machinery, unfinished routes. That is a better picture of an economy than the familiar metaphor of a perfectly balanced machine.

Economic life is always under construction. People inherit rules they did not choose and then change them, often unevenly. New technology creates routes and hazards. Political agreements bolt new platforms onto old ones. A welfare program designed for one labor market remains in place after the market changes. A tax preference becomes a beam supporting an entire industry. A temporary emergency measure hardens into permanent architecture.

The lesson is not that construction is corrupt. It is that constructed rules can be reconstructed.

Markets require rules about possession, contracts, liability, corporations, bankruptcy, currency, infrastructure, and enforcement. There is no untouched “free market” hiding beneath public choices. There are only different ways of building the platform on which people trade. The question is not whether government will interfere with a natural game. The game already rests on public decisions. The question is whose freedom those decisions protect.

This is where the ladders matter. A ladder represents opportunity, but a ladder can exist without reaching the next girder. Training does not create a job. Effort does not erase a disability. A college degree does not guarantee affordable housing near the work. A labor shortage does not automatically give a worker bargaining power if healthcare is tied to employment and savings have run out.

“There is a ladder” is not the same claim as “you can get out.”

The hammer matters too. For a few seconds it reverses the relation of power. The hazards that threatened Jumpman become objects he can destroy. But while holding the hammer he loses other capacities: he cannot climb a ladder or jump a gap. Then the music changes, the power expires, and ordinary vulnerability returns.[2]

Temporary assistance often works like that. A severance check, an emergency grant, a tax refund, a strike fund, or unemployment insurance can be indispensable. But a temporary buffer is not the same as a standing right. The moment of leverage ends. The timer resumes. A person must once again prove eligibility, find the correct form, accept surveillance, or wait for the next crisis to be recognized.

The point is not to sneer at ladders and hammers. We need education, emergency aid, unions, labor standards, public services, and opportunities to advance. The point is to stop mistaking each useful tool for a floor beneath the whole structure.

4. The Four Boards

The four boards of *Donkey Kong* are variations on insecurity. Each teaches a different lesson about how hazards move.

Barrels: shocks roll downhill

On the Barrels board, Donkey Kong sends barrels down slanted girders. Some roll predictably. Some drop down ladders. Blue barrels that reach the oil drum can generate fireball enemies that then move independently. A single hazard becomes a recurring one.[3]

Economic shocks cascade in much the same way. A rent increase consumes the money reserved for a car repair. The unreliable car causes missed shifts. Missed shifts reduce the

paycheck. The smaller paycheck triggers a late fee. One barrel reaches the oil drum and returns as fire.

Resilience matters, but resilience is not an infinite moral obligation. Praising people for surviving repeated shocks can become a polite way of refusing to reduce the shocks. The person with no reserve is ordered to become more adaptable; the institution rolling risks downhill is treated as weather.

Call this the **resilience trap**: converting a structural failure into a demand for better individual performance.

Conveyors: movement is not control

On the Conveyors board, belts carry cement pans while the direction of the machinery shifts. Jumpman is moving even when he would prefer not to move. Timing becomes a response to a pace imposed from elsewhere.

Workplaces often contain a less theatrical version of the same problem. Software measures keystrokes. Warehouses set rates. Scheduling systems rearrange lives with little notice. Subcontracting scatters accountability. A worker may be “free” to change jobs while an entire sector converges on the same practices.

Productivity can liberate people from drudgery, or it can make the belt run faster. Technology does not choose between those futures. Bargaining power and policy do.

Elevators: mobility depends on systems

The Elevators board offers elevators, which sound like upward mobility until one notices that Jumpman does not control them. He must enter and exit at the right moment while springs rain near the top.

We often narrate mobility as a personal trait: ambitious people rise. In practice, ascent depends on systems—transportation, childcare, health, schools, stable schedules, credit, social networks, and simple luck. Skill helps someone catch an elevator. Skill did not install it, set its speed, or decide where it stops.

Saying this does not deny personal effort. It explains what people need before their effort can carry them very far.

Rivets: changing the structure changes the problem

On the Rivets board, Jumpman stops merely dodging. He removes eight rivets from the platforms supporting Donkey Kong. When the last one disappears, the structure changes and the ape falls. Mario and Pauline reunite briefly beneath a heart.[4]

This is the most politically suggestive screen, and the easiest to misuse. An economy is not a tower we should recklessly dismantle. People need food, care, energy, housing, sanitation, transport, medicine, and coordination. Necessary work does not vanish because a metaphor reaches its climax.

The lesson is simple: sometimes the answer to a recurring hazard is not a more agile jump. It is a change in the rules producing the hazard.

UBI is one such structural change. It does not remove every barrel. It changes the consequence of refusing to stand beneath one.

5. Pauline and the Life That Cannot Begin

Pauline has traditionally been described as the prize at the top of the game. That description repeats the game's worst assumption.

A person is not a trophy for male achievement. Pauline has no meaningful agency in the 1981 cabinet: she waits, calls for help, and leaves behind collectible possessions. That limitation belongs to the design and to a long history of stories in which women serve as motives, rewards, or symbols rather than full participants. A responsible metaphor should expose that reduction, not inherit it.

Pauline works better as a symbol of **being together**: relationship, presence, affection, rest, care, and the ordinary human life that production is supposed to support. She is not what Mario earns. She represents what the climb continually postpones.

The startling fact is that being with Pauline is mechanically impossible.

The cabinet has states for separation, danger, rescue, scoring, death, and reset. It has no durable state for life together. When the rivets are gone, Donkey Kong falls headfirst. Mario and Pauline stand beneath a heart for a few seconds. Then the game returns to the beginning at greater difficulty. Mario can save Pauline, but he cannot build a life with her. The game can represent climbing toward relationship; it cannot represent inhabiting one.

The cabinet cannot survive the happy ending.

That is not merely a joke about an old arcade machine. It names a familiar way of living. Finish this shift, then life can begin. Earn this promotion. Pay this debt. Reach this number. Survive this quarter. The promised life remains just beyond the next board, while every achievement resets the standard.

Call this the **deferred-life trap**: enduring the present on the promise that life will begin later, inside a system that keeps converting "later" into another round.

Paid work is part of life, and often a valuable part. But no defensible economy should treat friendship, parenting, love, citizenship, recovery, art, and rest as tiny cutscenes between productive levels. The purpose of higher productivity should include more human time—not only a higher score.

UBI does not award Pauline to Mario. It cannot manufacture love, cure loneliness, or make care effortless. Its contribution is humbler and more real: it protects some time outside the cabinet. It gives people greater power to be present without first proving that every hour of presence has market value.

6. The Cabinet Has Older Code

The game's imagery did not appear from nowhere. Its gorilla, captive woman, male rescuer, and vertical urban structure loosely evoke *King Kong*. A federal appeals court said as much in the trademark fight between Universal and Nintendo, even while concluding that the works were legally distinct.[5]

That ancestry deserves attention because the 1933 film carries racial, colonial, and sexual meanings that cannot be reduced to innocent adventure. Film scholars have examined its stereotyped Indigenous islanders; its opposition between white modernity and a manufactured "primitive" world; the capture, chaining, transport, and commercial exhibition of Kong; and its use of a blonde white woman to stir the racist fear of a nonwhite male threatening a white woman. Those readings belong to the history of Jim Crow, empire, laws against interracial marriage, colonial spectacle, and the long racist association of nonwhite people with apes.[6]

This does not prove that the filmmakers secretly encoded a one-to-one allegory of the transatlantic slave trade. Nor does it make Donkey Kong a racial group, Pauline property, or Mario a white conqueror. The history of an image is not identical to every later use of it. But inherited images still carry weight.

The earlier exploitation film *Ingagi*—a fraudulent "documentary" that sexualized African women and apes—showed that there was a paying audience for this kind of racist spectacle. Its success is often discussed as part of the business climate in which RKO approved *King Kong*, although it should not be treated as the one proven source of the later film.[7]

Why include this history in an essay about UBI? Because metaphors import more than their authors intend. If we casually cast a dark ape as the embodiment of economic evil and a passive white woman as the reward for defeating him, we can reproduce an older moral picture while imagining that we are merely nostalgic.

The repair is not to abandon the game. It is to move the critique. Donkey Kong is a visible opponent with power because of where he stands, not a race and not the whole economic

system. Pauline is a person whom the cabinet fails to represent as free, not a prize. The cabinet—the rules that confine every character to a narrow set of roles—is the main metaphor for the system.

Once we see the older code, we can refuse to run it unchanged.

7. Who Keeps Score?

Arcade cabinets are wonderfully honest about their business model. The player inserts a quarter. The machine provides a scarce supply of lives. Difficulty converts time into failure. Failure invites another quarter. The player keeps the score; the cabinet keeps the money.

That does not mean every employer is an arcade operator or every wage is an extraction. Exchange can benefit everyone involved. The narrower lesson is that a measure can reward skill while hiding the structure that makes the contest profitable.

Economic scoreboards do this constantly. Wages count paid labor but not the full value of unpaid caregiving. Gross domestic product rises when money changes hands, including money spent repairing preventable damage, but it does not directly measure whether people have more control over their lives. Hours worked can indicate opportunity, desperation, ambition, understaffing, or some mixture of all four. A rising total does not tell us which.

Even UBI advocates can fall into the scoreboard trap. When critics say that unconditional income will make people work less, supporters often rush to prove that recipients will keep supplying nearly the same amount of paid labor—or even more. Karl Widerquist calls this a fatal trap. The argument is not only about what the evidence shows. It often hides a moral claim: poor people who refuse an available job deserve nothing. If advocates accept paid hours as the sole measure of success, then any parent who reduces a shift to care for a child, any student who gains time to learn, and any worker who leaves a degrading job appears as a policy failure.[8]

Evidence matters. Predictions of mass withdrawal from work are not supported by prominent experiments and programs. Finland's limited basic-income experiment produced small employment effects while recipients reported better economic security and mental well-being. Research on Alaska's universal annual dividend found no reduction in overall employment and an increase in part-time work.[9] But neither case is a full test of a national, subsistence-level UBI, and neither licenses certainty about every design.

More importantly, "nobody will work less" is the wrong promise. A meaningful UBI should allow some people to refuse some paid work. Otherwise it has failed at one of its central purposes.

The real questions are: Which work declines? What replaces it? Do wages and conditions improve in jobs people were previously forced to accept? Is unpaid care shared more fairly?

Are people healthier, safer, and more able to choose? Experiments can show some effects on individuals, but they have trouble showing how a permanent national floor would change wages and working conditions. A pilot gives selected people money. A UBI changes what millions of people can say no to at once.

The game remembers Mario's points but not his liberation. A humane economy must remember more.

8. Victory Without Finality

The original arcade game has no final domestic scene, no retirement, no flourishing city after the rescue. Clear the rivets and the reunion lasts seconds. Then the sequence begins again, harder.

The heart is a cutscene. The reset is the institution.

This is **victory without finality**: achievements are real, but none secures the underlying condition they appear to promise. A raise is consumed by rent. A second job pays for childcare required by the second job. A degree opens a professional gate and arrives with debt. A record month becomes next month's quota. Even genuine progress can be reorganized into a new minimum.

None of these outcomes is universal or inevitable. Many people improve their lives through work, ownership, education, cooperation, and luck. The metaphor is not a prophecy. It is a warning against defining freedom as success within a repeating contest.

An extra life does not solve this problem. It is a buffer against failure, and buffers are valuable. But an extra life returns Jumpman to the same cabinet under the same rules. This is why UBI should not be described as an extra life. If the payment is merely enough to keep a worker available for the next round—too small to refuse, politically fragile, swallowed by debt, or paired with the destruction of essential services—it becomes another maintenance feature.

A genuine exit floor has to support life outside the immediate command of the game.

The distinction also clarifies what UBI is not. It is not a payment for winning. It is not charity for losing. It is not compensation for being useless. It is a standing recognition that the resources and institutions of a society should not be arranged so that some people can demand active cooperation from others merely because those others have no independent means to live.

At level 22, the cabinet adds a strange accidental ending. A programming overflow leaves so little time that the first board kills ordinary play within seconds. For decades this was the famous "kill screen." In 2025, a computer-assisted emulator run exploited a broken-ladder glitch

to pass that board, only to encounter the game's current practical limit on the Rivets board later in the level. The feat is essentially unavailable to a human using an original joystick in real time.[10]

The kill screen should not carry too much philosophical weight. It is a bug, not the secret intention of the designers. But as an accidental allegory it is nearly perfect. Exceptional technique can postpone the limit. It cannot turn a system with no state for completion into a home.

9. The Right to Quit and the Power to Quit

Most defenses of market freedom begin with a true fact: in ordinary employment, a worker has a legal right to quit. The employer does not own the worker. Offers can be accepted or refused. People can search for alternatives.

The mistake is to treat that formal right as the end of the inquiry.

Widerquist draws a simple distinction: having the legal right to say no is not the same as being able to say no and still live. He calls the fuller kind of freedom "effective control self-ownership." In plain terms, an agreement is truly voluntary only when a person has an acceptable way out. Someone offered several jobs may be free to choose an employer while still being forced to take whatever kind of paid work is available. A menu of doors inside the cabinet is not the same as an exit from the cabinet.[11]

This argument does not require self-sufficiency. Nobody is independent of everyone. Infants, elders, and adults all rely on inherited knowledge, nature, infrastructure, care, and cooperation. Freedom is not the fantasy of needing nothing from others. It is protection against having our need for one another turned into someone else's power to command us.

Employers do not create the human need for food, shelter, and care. Their bargaining power partly comes from property rules that leave many people without independent access to those necessities. The job offer arrives after the threat point has already been established. The workplace is where this vulnerability becomes visible, not necessarily where it begins.

Nor does an exit option mean a right to demand every luxury without contribution. The relevant floor is sufficient for basic security: food, shelter, clothing, utilities, and realistic access to care and participation. Above that floor, people will still pursue income, status, craft, comfort, purpose, and shared projects. UBI can change the opening bid by making delay, search, and refusal financially survivable. Income no longer has to begin at zero.

This is what makes the policy structurally different from a means-tested benefit that disappears as earnings rise or a job guarantee that conditions income on accepting an assigned form of labor. Each of those policies may have useful roles. Targeted benefits can meet expensive

needs that a flat payment cannot. Public jobs can provide valuable work. But neither, by itself, creates an unconditional power to refuse.

Universality is not based on the belief that rich people need help. A universal payment can be recovered from affluent households through progressive taxes. Its purpose is to make the floor a basic part of membership in society, instead of something that appears only after an official decides a person deserves help. No one has to become poor enough, prove unemployment, disclose a relationship, or prove an inability to work before the floor appears.

A right that activates only after a bureaucracy confirms your failure is not the same as a right that travels with you.

The power to say no is a minimum condition of freedom, not a complete account of citizenship. Democratic life also needs voice, care, reciprocity, and institutions through which people solve problems together. Exit can become isolating if it is the only tool available. The argument for UBI is not that every obligation disappears when a check arrives. It is that obligations owed to one another should be defended as public obligations—not imposed privately by whoever controls a person's next meal.

10. What UBI Changes

At this point, the cabinet has done its job: it has made the problem visible. The policy must now survive outside the metaphor.

A basic income changes more than consumption. It changes the background against which offers are made.

For the worker, it can create **the power to wait**: the ability to search more carefully, reduce hours, leave abuse, join a strike, attempt a small enterprise, or demand a higher wage. Employers can still make unattractive offers. They may simply discover that fewer people are forced to accept them.

This bargaining effect is not automatic. In a stripped-down model, a payment received whether someone works or not can disappear from the comparison between accepting a job and refusing it. The effect appears when the model includes actual constraints: food and rent, debt, risk, job-search costs, care obligations, and the ability to survive while waiting. Its size therefore depends on the payment, the market, and the surrounding institutions—not on cash alone.[12]

For the caregiver, it recognizes that socially necessary activity happens outside payrolls. Feeding a disabled spouse, raising a child, supporting an aging parent, maintaining a household, volunteering, and sustaining a community are forms of work even when markets record no wage. Widerquist's reply to the "free-rider" objection is useful here. Before calling

recipients exploiters, ask who controls land and resources, who has no realistic alternative to paid work, and whose unpaid labor is missing from the books.[13]

For the person facing violence at home, an independent income can reduce one tool of control. It is not a substitute for shelters, legal aid, healthcare, housing, or policing reform. Cash does not abolish danger. But the ability to leave is not strengthened by having no money in one's own name.

For artists, students, entrepreneurs, and people recovering from illness, UBI can make room for activities whose value is uncertain, delayed, or not privately profitable. Some attempts will fail. That is not a defect unique to ordinary people. Modern economies already spread business risk through limited liability, bankruptcy, public research, tax preferences, and financial rescues. The question is who receives permission to experiment.

For essential but unpleasant work, UBI creates an honest test. If a job must be done and few people will do it once refusal is survivable, society has several choices: raise the wage, improve the conditions, redesign the task, automate part of it, share the burden, or make an open public case for requiring it. "Someone will accept because the alternative is misery" is not an efficiency miracle. It is hidden compulsion.

But cash is individual, and workplace power is often collective. A worker with a financial floor may be able to quit one bad job. A union or sector-wide agreement can change the job for everyone. UBI cannot by itself eliminate employer concentration, noncompete clauses, retaliation, wage theft, or dangerous conditions. Its best role is to support voice as well as exit: making strikes and organizing more survivable while labor law, antitrust enforcement, wage standards, and collective bargaining change the workplace itself.[12]

Some prices would probably rise. An industry that needs many workers and has relied on low wages may charge more when wages increase. Some firms may automate, shrink, relocate, accept lower profits, or discover better ways to work. Some jobs may disappear. None of those effects can be read from the wage change alone. Whether the overall result is regressive depends on who receives net income, who pays the taxes, which prices rise, and how quickly supply responds. Households that spend most of their income on necessities are especially exposed, so protecting the real value of the floor matters as much as announcing its dollar value.

An exit-level UBI would also change the economy that finances it. Taxes can affect work, saving, investment, and where mobile capital is placed. Recipients may change their hours, bargaining, consumption, and risk-taking. Firms may change wages, prices, technology, and location.

Gross-cost and net-cost arithmetic is therefore a starting point, not an economy-wide forecast.

Models can help, but their results depend heavily on assumptions about taxes, labor response, capital mobility, public services, and the size of the payment. Honest advocacy should publish those assumptions and plan for outcomes less favorable than the preferred estimate.[14]

UBI is not a housing program or a healthcare system. A large transfer added to an economy already producing all it can may raise demand faster than supply. Housing is especially dangerous because land is fixed and new construction is often blocked. Without more homes, tenant protection, competition policy, healthcare capacity, and taxes on rents and windfalls, landlords and other gatekeepers may capture part of a basic income.[15]

If rents or other necessities rise enough to erase the recipient's new power to refuse, the program has failed by its own standard. Where supply remains fixed, larger checks can become larger opportunities for gatekeepers to capture the floor.

The other players adapt too. A workable design must anticipate those responses rather than treating recipients as the only people who change their behavior.

UBI therefore belongs in a broader package of policies. It cannot replace universal healthcare, disability supports, education, housing policy, labor law, unions, antitrust enforcement, public infrastructure, or democratic government. A flat grant is poorly suited to needs that vary dramatically. Someone requiring round-the-clock care needs more than someone who does not. Abolishing every service to finance a small check would not create freedom; it would auction necessities back to people at retail prices.

The amount and financing matter. A token payment may reduce stress without giving people much power to refuse. A larger payment requires substantial taxes or spending changes. The headline cost—payment times population—is not the same as the final cost because higher-income households pay some or all of the money back through taxes. Still, a lower final cost does not mean free.

For scale, Rossbach and Widerquist model an illustrative UBI of $16,000 per adult and $8,000 per child using 2024 household microdata and a 50 percent take-back rate on non-UBI income up to the break-even point. They estimate $4.86 trillion in gross payments but approximately $783.7 billion in net redistributive cost, about 2.67 percent of GDP. That gap shows why the amount paid out is not the program's net fiscal burden. It is not a complete budget: the authors isolate UBI from its eventual tax-and-benefit integration and do not model its behavioral or economy-wide effects.

A serious proposal must state who pays, which programs remain, how prices and supply will be managed, and how the floor will keep pace with the cost of basic needs. It needs a full financing and transition score.[16]

A negative income tax is not simply the opposite of UBI. With equivalent tax-and-benefit schedules, an NIT and a UBI can produce the same net incomes and the same effective tax

rate on the next dollar earned while the NIT routes smaller gross payments. A differently designed NIT can concentrate more assistance at the bottom, but then it is no longer the same distributive program. UBI arrives in advance and without a separate phaseout process. The practical differences include timing, administration, visibility, individual entitlement, and the risk of delayed or mistaken payment. If an NIT were paid automatically, individually, and continuously at a level that made refusal safe, much of the moral distance between the policies would narrow. If such an NIT also achieved the same dependable floor with smaller gross flows, the principle defended here would have no reason to reject it. The label is secondary.[17]

The strongest case for UBI does not depend on a prediction that artificial intelligence will eliminate every job. It applies now. People already enter markets from radically unequal positions. Care is already undervalued. The ability to refuse is already distributed according to wealth. Automation may intensify those facts, but it did not invent them.

11. The Objections That Survive the Metaphor

A good metaphor should not make objections disappear. It should help us state them more clearly.

"People will stop doing necessary work."

Some people will probably reduce paid hours, especially if the payment is large enough to matter. The consequences depend on who reduces which work. Time moved from a dangerous job to caregiving is not equivalent to time moved from emergency nursing to nothing. Evidence from partial programs does not establish the effect of a full national UBI, but it gives little support to the fantasy that nearly everyone becomes idle.

The moral answer is more important. If necessary work can attract workers only by threatening everyone with destitution, its apparent affordability is misleading. Raise compensation, improve conditions, invest in labor-saving technology, or distribute burdens fairly. UBI does not abolish mutual obligation; it prevents that obligation from being defined only by those who control access to paid work.

"It rewards people who contribute nothing."

No society begins with wealth distributed in exact proportion to what each person produced. Current owners benefit from laws, public infrastructure, accumulated science, natural resources, unpaid care, and generations of prior work. UBI need not declare every recipient equally productive. It can recognize that nobody created the entire platform on which private contribution becomes valuable.

There will be free riders under any system. There are free riders in executive suites, protected monopolies, inherited fortunes, and households as well as among benefit recipients. Unequal contribution is a reason to design rules carefully, not to make survival conditional on pleasing an employer.

That does not settle every question of fair reciprocity. A durable UBI would need a public ethic of contribution broad enough to recognize caregiving, study, volunteering, and democratic work without pretending that every activity is equally valuable. Survival can remain unconditional while taxes and ordinary civic obligations bind people to a shared society. Access to the floor, however, must not depend on performing assigned labor. Otherwise the work requirement has merely changed uniforms. The power to refuse private domination is compatible with obligations people authorize together.

“Landlords will take it.”

They may take part of it where housing supply is scarce and tenant bargaining power is weak. That is an argument for housing reform alongside UBI, not proof that tenants should remain poor. We do not answer extortion by ensuring the target has nothing worth taking. We reduce gatekeeping power.

“It is unaffordable.”

Some versions are. A UBI can be set too high, financed in a way that burdens poor people, or layered onto a tax system that cannot sustain it. Honest advocacy should reject magical arithmetic. But multiplying the grant by the population gives the total amount sent out, not the amount society must find after taxes flow back. Under a tax-funded universal system, many households receive a payment with one hand and finance some or all of it with the other. The real debate concerns who gains, who pays, which services remain, how behavior changes, and what we choose to fund.

Administrative simplicity is not automatic either. Legislatures may preserve existing programs while adding a new payment, piling costs on top of one another instead of making a clean replacement. Yet abolishing every targeted program would expose people with high medical, disability, housing, or caregiving needs. A credible proposal needs an integration map: which programs remain, which are revised, which tax provisions change, what new revenue is required, and how the transition will be staged. “One check replaces the bureaucracy” is a slogan, not a budget.[18]

Affordability is partly a moral comparison. We should ask not only what the floor costs but what insecurity currently costs through homelessness, preventable illness, family instability, emergency bureaucracy, low bargaining power, and lost chances to learn and grow.

“Why pay the rich?”

For the same reason a public sidewalk does not vanish beneath a millionaire: universality establishes a common status, while taxes decide who pays. Sending a rich person a payment and taxing back more than the payment is not a gift to the rich. It is one way to make the benefit automatic, stigma-free, and harder to lose because of paperwork or official error. Whether that simplicity outweighs other design concerns is a practical question, not a paradox.

“Work gives people purpose.”

Often it does. UBI does not forbid employment, craft, discipline, cooperation, or ambition. It distinguishes purposeful activity from compulsory dependence. A person who loves the game can keep playing. A person who wants to build, teach, heal, repair, cultivate, or compete can do so. Purpose produced by the threat of hunger is a suspicious kind of purpose.

The best response to meaningful work is to make more work meaningful—and to let people reject work that is not.

12. How High Must the Floor Be?

The phrase “basic income” can conceal a decisive question: basic enough for what?

If the payment buys only a few groceries, it may still help. It may smooth a shock, reduce debt, or make a small refusal possible. But it does not establish the exit option described here. A freedom-based UBI must be high enough, together with retained public services, to secure an acceptable life outside any particular employer or household authority.

That standard depends on a person’s circumstances. Housing costs differ. Disability changes needs. Children require support. Healthcare systems alter what cash must cover. No single national number can express the whole structure.

The floor also has to be dependable. A benefit that can be removed because a recipient angers an official, accepts a gift, moves in with a partner, misses an appointment, or earns one dollar too much cannot anchor refusal. Predictability is part of its value. So is individual payment. Household-level benefits can reinforce dependence within households by placing resources under one person’s control.

Dependability is political as well as administrative. A worker cannot safely refuse today on the promise of income that may be repealed tomorrow or quietly eroded by inflation. Automatic inflation adjustment, reliable payment, and durable financing help turn a nominal benefit into a credible outside option.

Indexation can preserve a claim on goods; it cannot create the goods. If housing, care, food, or energy remain constrained, protecting the floor requires expanding capacity or limiting capture, not merely increasing the payment again.[15]

Finally, the floor must not be financed by sawing away every other beam. UBI is not freedom if it arrives with lost medical care, inaccessible disability support, unaffordable transit, and privatized schools. Cash is powerful because people know their own needs. Public services are powerful because some needs are shared, unpredictable, or too expensive to insure one person at a time. A mature welfare state can use both.

Widerquist's formulation is demanding: freedom requires not merely permission to refuse but the effective power to do so. That gives UBI a test. Ask of any proposal: Could a person actually say no to a degrading offer and remain housed, fed, cared for, and connected to society? If not, the payment may be useful—but the exit is still painted on the wall.[19]

13. Freedom to Return

There is a risk in every argument about exit. It can sound like freedom means withdrawal: leaving the job, leaving the market, leaving the shared project, leaving everyone else to do the work.

But the best reason to build an exit is that it changes participation.

When people can leave, those who stay have chosen more meaningfully. Employers must persuade rather than merely wait out desperation. Cooperation becomes less like conscription. A worker can return after caring for a parent. A student can return with a skill. A person can reject one workplace without rejecting work. A citizen can take time to recover without being exiled from economic life.

UBI protects the freedom to return on better terms.

This is why the player matters more than Jumpman. A player who can step away may still love the challenge. Games can be thrilling precisely because their stakes are bounded. We consent to difficult rules when the contest occupies part of life rather than holding life hostage.

The Donkey Kong economy asks, **How high can you get?** A freer society would keep that question for those who enjoy it and add others the cabinet cannot score:

Can you say no?

Can you care for someone?

Can you rest without falling through the floor?

Can you remain a person when you are not producing points?

Can victory become a life instead of a cutscene?

On the rivet board, Mario reaches Pauline. A heart appears. Then the institution resets. The cabinet remembers the score and erases the reunion because endless play is the only future its code can imagine.

Our economy is not an arcade cabinet. Its rules are harder to see, more complicated to change, and far more consequential. But unlike Jumpman, we are not trapped inside the software. We can examine the platform. We can repair ladders, slow conveyors, redirect risks, strengthen workers' bargaining power, and build a floor beneath every player.

The goal is not a world where nobody plays.

It is a world where the game must be worth playing because people possess the power to stop.

Endnotes

1. Nintendo released Donkey Kong as an arcade game in 1981. The hero was originally identified as Jumpman and depicted as a carpenter; Pauline was initially called Lady. Unless otherwise noted, the gameplay descriptions in this essay refer to the familiar U.S. arcade set. The earliest Japanese set displays “HOW HIGH CAN YOU TRY?” rather than “HOW HIGH CAN YOU GET?” and uses a different board progression. See Nintendo, Donkey Kong Operation Manual, TKG4-UP (1981), https://archive.org/details/donkeykongoperationmanualtkg-4-up; Jennifer Latson, “Donkey Kong and Mario: How They First Jumped Into Americans’ Hearts,” Time, June 2, 2015, https://time.com/3901489/donkey-kong-anniversary/; “Donkey Kong,” Silverball Retro Arcade, https://silverballmuseum.com/product/donkey-kong/; and “Donkey Kong,” Atari Compendium, https://www.ataricompendium.com/game_library/easter_eggs/arcade/arcadedonkeykong.html.

2. The hammer temporarily destroys hazards but prevents climbing and jumping while it is active. See “Donkey Kong,” Silverball Retro Arcade, https://silverballmuseum.com/product/donkey-kong/; and the game-mechanics discussion in Computer Archeology’s Donkey Kong materials, https://computerarcheology.com/Arcade/DonkeyKong/.

3. The four unique board types are commonly known as Barrels, Conveyors (or the Pie Factory), Elevators, and Rivets. Their order and repetition differ across levels and ROM sets. On the Barrels board, blue barrels that enter the oil drum can spawn fireball enemies. See “Donkey Kong,” Silverball Retro Arcade, https://silverballmuseum.com/product/donkey-kong/; “Barrel,” Super Mario Wiki, https://www.mariowiki.com/Barrel; and “Donkey Kong,” Atari Compendium, https://www.ataricompendium.com/game_library/easter_eggs/arcade/arcadedonkeykong.html.

4. Removing the eight rivets makes Donkey Kong fall and produces the brief reunion under a heart before play resumes at a higher level of difficulty. See “Donkey Kong,” Silverball Retro Arcade, https://silverballmuseum.com/product/donkey-kong/; and Computer Archeology’s Donkey Kong materials, https://computerarcheology.com/Arcade/DonkeyKong/. The heart and reset are directly visible in the game’s transition sequence.

5. Universal City Studios, Inc. v. Nintendo Co., Ltd., 746 F.2d 112, 117–20 (2d Cir. 1984). The court described the shared elements as a gorilla, a captive woman, a male rescuer, and a building scenario, and observed that Donkey Kong loosely evokes the King Kong films while finding no actionable likelihood of confusion. https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/appellate-courts/F2/746/112/30961/.

6. For major scholarly treatments of race, gender, colonial spectacle, and sexuality in King Kong, see Fatimah Tobing Rony, The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle (Duke University Press, 1996), chap. 6, “King Kong and the Monster in Ethnographic Cinema”; Cynthia Erb, Tracking King Kong: A Hollywood Icon in World Culture, 2nd ed. (Wayne State University Press, 2009); Rhona J. Berenstein, Attack of the Leading Ladies: Gender, Sexuality, and Spectatorship in Classic Horror Cinema (Columbia University Press, 1996); and Robin R. Means Coleman, Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present (Routledge, 2011). These works support serious racial and colonial readings; they do not establish a single uncontested authorial intention.

7. Ingagi was a 1930 exploitation-film hoax released by Congo Pictures, not RKO. Its success is frequently discussed as evidence of the commercial appetite surrounding racialized ape-and-woman spectacle and as part of the industrial background to RKO’s King Kong. The stronger claim that it was the sole or proven direct creative source is not established. See Andrew Erish, “Illegitimate Dad of ‘Kong,’” Los Angeles Times, January 8, 2006, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2006-jan-08-ca-ingagi8-story.html.

8. Karl Widerquist, “The Fatal Trap UBI Boosters Keep Falling Into,” MIT Press Reader, November 10, 2025, https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/the-fatal-trap-ubi-boosters-keep-falling-into/. Widerquist argues that advocates should not treat paid labor hours as the only measure of whether UBI succeeds, because the policy is partly intended to make refusal possible.

9. Finland's 2017–2018 experiment paid €560 per month to 2,000 unemployed participants; the final evaluation found small employment effects and better perceived economic security and mental well-being. Finnish Government, "Results of the Basic Income Experiment," May 6, 2020, https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/-/1271139/perustulokokeilun-tulokset-tyollisyysvaikutukset-vahaisia-toimeentulo-ja-psyykkinen-terveys-koettiin-paremmaksi. On Alaska, see Damon Jones and Ioana Marinescu, "The Labor Market Impacts of Universal and Permanent Cash Transfers: Evidence from the Alaska Permanent Fund," American Economic Journal: Economic Policy 14, no. 2 (2022): 315–340, https://doi.org/10.1257/pol.20190299. These cases differ materially from a national subsistence-level UBI.

10. The level-22 kill screen results from a bonus-timer calculation overflowing an eight-bit value, leaving only a few seconds of ordinary play. In 2025, a tool-assisted emulator run used a broken-ladder glitch to clear 22-1 and continued to 22-6, the Rivets board, where no completion method is currently known. The maneuver is not practically reproducible by a human on an original real-time cabinet. Kyle Orland, "Donkey Kong's Famed Kill Screen Has Been Cleared for the First Time," Ars Technica, February 7, 2025, https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2025/02/donkey-kongs-famed-kill-screen-has-been-cleared-for-the-first-time/.

11. Karl Widerquist, "The Physical Basis of Voluntary Trade," Human Rights Review 11, no. 1 (2010): 83–103, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12142-008-0105-z. Widerquist defines effective control self-ownership as the effective power to accept or refuse interaction and argues that genuinely voluntary interaction requires an acceptable exit option.

12. On the ambiguous bargaining effects in a stripped-down model and the importance of search conditions, see Sarah Bernhard, Sandra Bohmann, Susann Fiedler, Maximilian Kasy, Jürgen Schupp, Frederik Schwerter, "Basic Income and Labor Supply: Evidence from an RCT in Germany," DIW Berlin Discussion Paper 2123 (2025), https://www.diw.de/documents/publikationen/73/diw_01.c.960424.de/dp2123.pdf. On employer power and collective worker voice, see U.S. Department of the Treasury, The State of Labor Market Competition in the U.S. Economy (March 2022), https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/136/State-of-Labor-Market-Competition-2022.pdf; and OECD, Negotiating Our Way Up: Collective Bargaining in a Changing World of Work (OECD Publishing, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1787/1fd2da34-en. The Treasury report explains how search costs, information gaps, limited mobility, concentration, and restrictive agreements can allow firms to suppress wages or conditions even without a literal single employer. The OECD analysis emphasizes bargaining coverage and the distinct roles of sectoral and firm-level negotiation.

13. Karl Widerquist, "Who Exploits Who?," Political Studies 54, no. 3 (2006): 444–464, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2006.00614.x; and Karl Widerquist, "Reciprocity and the Guaranteed Income," Politics & Society 27, no. 3 (1999): 387–402, https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329299027003004. Widerquist asks who controls land and other resources before judging benefit recipients as free riders and challenges the convention that treats paid employment as the only relevant form of work.

14. For broad fiscal and design tradeoffs, see Hilary Hoynes and Jesse Rothstein, "Universal Basic Income in the United States and Advanced Countries," Annual Review of Economics 11 (2019): 929–958, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-economics-080218-030237; and OECD, "Basic Income as a Policy Option: Can It Add Up?" (2017), https://doi.org/10.1787/77d7fe00-en. For one calibrated general-equilibrium analysis, see Yongsung Chang, Jong-Suk Han, and Sun-Bin Kim, "Negative Income Tax and Universal Basic Income in the Eyes of Aiyagari," Macroeconomic Dynamics 28, no. 4 (2024): 813–825, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1365100523000263. Chang and coauthors model reductions in labor, capital, and output under some tax-and-transfer designs, but explicitly warn that their conclusions depend on restrictive assumptions about tax schedules and administrative costs. The study illustrates why economy-wide responses must be modeled; it does not supply a design-independent forecast.

15. The price effects of cash transfers depend on how large they are, how they are financed, how much the economy can produce, how quickly supply can expand, and how much control sellers have over prices. Housing markets with limited supply deserve particular attention. See James Allen IV and Ugo Gentilini, Cash Transfers and Inflation: An Overview of the Evidence, IFPRI Evidence Brief (October 2025), https://hdl.handle.net/10568/177175. The review finds minimal average price effects for most goods but larger effects where transfers substantially increase demand for goods with relatively inelastic supply. Historical evidence also does not justify treating a self-sustaining wage-price spiral as automatic: Jorge A. Alvarez et al., "Wage-Price Spirals: What Is the Historical Evidence?," IMF Working Paper 2022/221 (2022), https://doi.org/10.5089/9798400224294.001. Michael C. Munger identifies inflation and housing as underdeveloped issues in his review of Widerquist's Universal Basic Income, The Independent Review 30, no. 2 (Fall 2025), https://www.independent.org/tir/2025-fall/universal-basic-income-2/.

16. Karl Widerquist, Universal Basic Income (MIT Press, 2024), https://mitpress.mit.edu/9780262546898/universal-basic-income/, emphasizes the difference between gross outlay and net cost. See also Jack Rossbach and Karl Widerquist, "The Falling Cost of Basic Income in the United States, 1967–2024: Estimates for a Plan Large Enough to Eliminate Poverty," Basic Income Studies 21, no. 1 (2026): 21–57, https://doi.org/10.1515/bis-2025-0024. Using 2024 CPS/ASEC household microdata, their illustrative model sets UBI at $16,000 per adult and $8,000 per child with a 50 percent take-back rate on non-UBI income up to the break-even point. It estimates $4.86 trillion in gross payments and approximately $783.7 billion in net cost, or 2.67 percent of GDP. The article explicitly estimates UBI in isolation: it does not provide a complete financing or integration plan and does not model behavioral or economy-wide effects. The authors also note that combining the illustrative take-back rate with existing taxes could create high marginal rates for some households. These figures therefore illustrate the distinction between gross and net cost, not the final cost of an enacted proposal.

17. Davide Tondani, "Universal Basic Income and Negative Income Tax: Two Different Ways of Thinking Redistribution," Journal of Socio-Economics 38, no. 2 (2009): 246–255, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socec.2008.10.006; and Chang, Han, and Kim, "Negative Income Tax and Universal Basic Income in the Eyes of Aiyagari." Under specified tax schedules, the two forms can generate the same net-income allocation and effective marginal tax schedule, while differing in gross payment flows, timing, administration, and political or ethical framing.

18. OECD, "Basic Income as a Policy Option: Can It Add Up?" The OECD concludes that movement toward more universal support would require staged introduction and a parallel financing debate. See also James Browne and Herwig Immervoll, "Mechanics of Replacing Benefits Systems with a Basic Income: Comparative Results from a Microsimulation Approach," OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers, no. 201 (2018), https://doi.org/10.1787/ec38a279-en. These analyses show both sides of the transition problem: retaining all existing commitments can be expensive, while replacing targeted support can leave some high-need households worse off.

19. Widerquist, "The Physical Basis of Voluntary Trade," 83–103; and Karl Widerquist, Independence, Propertylessness, and Basic Income: A Theory of Freedom as the Power to Say No (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137313096. The relevant standard is effective, not merely formal, refusal power.

Related Essays by Sum Bunny

These essays develop neighboring arguments about UBI, the power to refuse, human dignity, and shared infrastructure. They are listed as related work, not as independent proof of the claims made here.

The Right to Refuse*: Why Survival Must Not Depend on Output* (2026). The plain-language statement of the freedom principle at the center of this essay.

The Vampire Is a Machine*: Extraction Without Hunger, Power Without Face* (2026). An account of systems that make participation look voluntary while making refusal unaffordable.

The Epstein Economy*: Mandatory Participation in the USA* (2026). A high-contrast examination of consent when leaving threatens a person's security.

UBI and the End of Combustive Social Design (2026). An argument about basic income, crisis spending, and the difference between gross outlay and net cost.

The Disposable Citizen*: AI, Dignity, and the Post-Labor Legitimacy Crisis* (2026). An extension of the UBI argument into a future in which labor may lose bargaining power before work disappears.

Sovereignty Without Enclosure*: Governing AI Infrastructure as a Buffer Commons* (2026). A related account of buffers, shared infrastructure, and the practical power to refuse.

THE DONKEY KONG ECONOMY

Appendix: Transmission

(Non-Analytical Layer)

First edition published on the Internet Archive, 2026.
Part of the Sum Bunny Canon (Ark Hive Press).

This work was developed with AI-assisted analysis tools. All arguments, structures, and final judgments are the author’s.

Hey Josiane,

Sum Bunny Loves You!!!